

# **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** April 19, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Beartooth Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease Renewal (R4)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Minutes

## **Background**

Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) is proposing to implement/renew a six-year grazing lease on a portion of the 36,000-acre Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA). The proposed grazing lease would utilize rest-rotation and spot treatment grazing to maintain and enhance wildlife habitat on approximately 9,520 acres of the BTWMA. The proposed lease would also incorporate 26,300 deeded acres of Sieben Live Stock, 2,200 acres BLM, and 320 acres DNRC lands into the grazing system. The total area encompassed by this proposed grazing lease arrangement is about 38,340 acres (60 square miles) of private, state, and federal lands.

This proposed exchange of use grazing lease is designed to provide a variety of habitat benefits, including maintain forage attractiveness/palatability of historic brome grass hay fields on the WMA, provide habitat structure diversity through spot grazing treatments on both the WMA and ranching lands, and a grazing rotation on other portions of the ranch that supports plant community health and includes rest pastures that provide cover and forage for wildlife. This system is expected to provide habitat benefits particularly for elk, mule and white-tailed deer, ruffed and dusky grouse, and a variety of nongame wildlife species. The proposed lease arrangement also includes provisions for continuing to provide public hunting access on the Sieben Live Stock Ranch. Livestock grazing has been used successfully as a habitat enhancement tool in cooperation with the neighboring Sieben Live Stock Company since 1992.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

The proposed lease renewal was available for public review and comment from February 5 through March 6, 2018. Solicitation of public input resulted in receipt of 12 comments (11 positive, 1 neutral/negative). The responses came from four organized groups (Montana Sportsmen Alliance, Lewis & Clark County Farm Bureau, Helena Hunters & Anglers Association and Western Landowners Alliance), with the remainder from private individuals.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

No action (no grazing lease) alternative: Forage conditions on these portions of the WMA would deteriorate and overall forage and cover diversity would be reduced. Large numbers of elk would likely use adjacent land forage during the winter and spring time periods, some of which is private lands.

Proposed action (renew grazing lease) alternative: Periodic reduction in residual vegetation, which in turn improves forage conditions and provides more diverse cover, particularly for species attracted to lighter cover. Soil and plant disturbance that will benefit seedling establishment of both desirable and possibly undesirable plant species. Provide for better fall and/or spring green-up vegetation for foraging elk, mule deer and other wildlife species, thereby reducing elk usage of adjacent private property during the winter and spring. Promote native plant community health over a large landscape, with associated ecological benefits.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends approval of the six-year grazing lease with Sieben Live Stock. FWP believes the action will maintain and improve forage and cover conditions for game and many nongame species. The system will continue to be monitored to detect any negative impacts to native vegetation.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the six-year livestock grazing lease arrangement on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area with Sieben Live Stock as proposed by the Department.